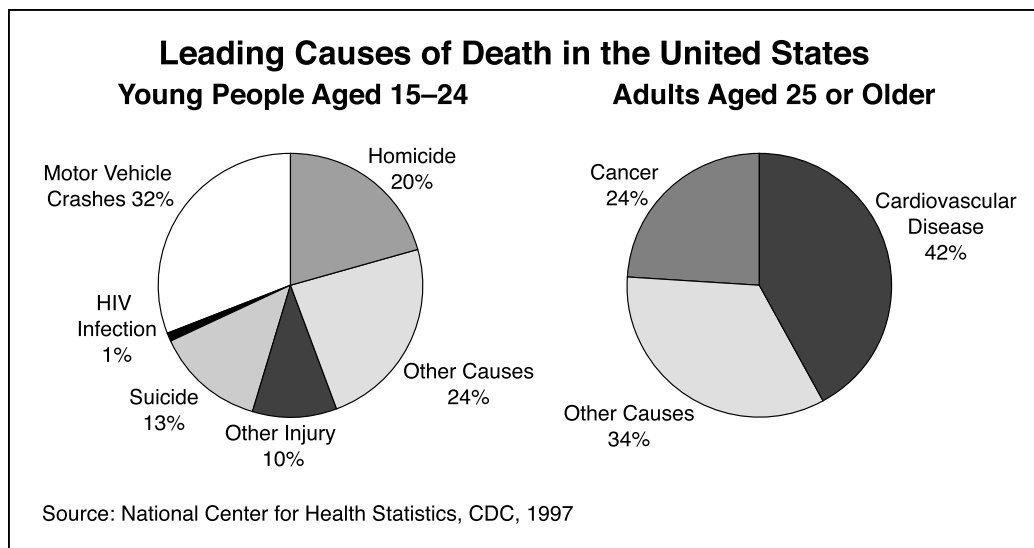


# Assessing Health Risk Behaviors Among Young People: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

AT-A-GLANCE  
2000



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*“One’s personal lifestyle is of profound and overriding importance in determining one’s health status and one’s chances for a full and complete life.”*

John R. Seffrin, PhD  
Chief Executive Officer, American Cancer Society

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



# Assessing Health Risk Behaviors Among Young People

## Risk Behaviors Are Linked to the Leading Causes of Death

Today, the health of young people—and the adults they will become—is critically linked to the health-related behaviors they choose to adopt. A limited number of behaviors contribute markedly to today's major killers. These behaviors, often established during youth, include

- Tobacco use.
- Unhealthy dietary behaviors.
- Inadequate physical activity.
- Alcohol and other drug use.
- Sexual behaviors that may result in HIV infection, other sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancies.
- Behaviors that may result in intentional injuries (violence and suicide) and unintentional injuries (motor vehicle crashes).

Among both children and adults, the leading causes of death are closely linked to these behaviors. Among adults, chronic diseases—such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes—are the nation's leading killers. Practicing healthy behaviors, such as eating low-fat, high-fruit-and-vegetable diets, getting regular physical activity, and refraining from tobacco use, could prevent many of these deaths. Because health-related behaviors are usually established in childhood, positive choices need to be promoted before damaging behaviors are initiated or become ingrained.

## Collecting Vital Information

Until this decade, little was known about the prevalence of behaviors practiced by young people that put their health at risk. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) now provides such information. Developed by CDC in collaboration with federal, state, and private-sector partners, this voluntary system includes a national survey and surveys conducted by state and local education agencies. The YRBSS provides vital information on risk behaviors among young people to more effectively target and improve health programs.

## Purposes of the YRBSS

- Determine the prevalence and age of initiation of health-risk behaviors.
- Assess whether health-risk behaviors increase, decrease, or remain the same over time.
- Allow researchers to examine the cooccurrence of health risk behaviors among young people.
- Provide comparable national, state, and local data.
- Monitor progress toward achieving the *Healthy People 2000* and *Healthy People 2010* objectives and the National Education Goals.

## Using YRBSS Data

State and local health and education officials use YRBSS data in a variety of ways:

- Implement or modify programs to address the behaviors of young people in a specific area.

*South Dakota used YRBSS data from Native American young people to help implement school health education in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.*

- Set program goals and objectives and monitor the progress toward those goals.

*Mississippi used its YRBSS data to help develop a strategic plan for school health.*

- Create awareness of the extent of risk behaviors among young people.

*Many states and cities, including Alabama, Illinois, Dallas, and Miami, have used YRBSS data to enhance teacher training programs.*

- Promote state-level changes that support health education curricula and coordinated school health programs.

*West Virginia used YRBSS data to help ensure that schools develop local School Improvement Councils to address issues related to children's health and safety.*

- Provide evidence-based data to support the need for health education.

*Maine used its YRBSS data to help obtain a grant to support mental health services in school-linked clinics.*

## CDC's Leadership Role

To ensure the availability of accurate and current information on health risk behaviors among young people, CDC provides funding and technical support to states and major cities to conduct a Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). In addition, CDC supports coordinated school health programs in 22 states to provide young people with the information and skills they need to avoid health-damaging behaviors.

### Assisting With State and Local Surveys

With technical assistance from CDC, staff of state and local departments of education and health conduct a YRBS every 2 years. Staff can add or delete questions in the core questionnaire to better meet the interests and needs of the state or local school district. School-based surveys were last conducted in 1997 among students in grades 9–12 in 39 states, 16 large cities, and 4 territories. The average sample size was 2,200.

CDC's technical assistance includes

- A 3-day training course for state and local coordinators.
- Specialized software to guide states in selecting participating schools.
- Assistance in analyzing data and preparing state-specific reports.
- Assistance in applying survey results to improve school health programs and policies.

### Conducting National Surveys

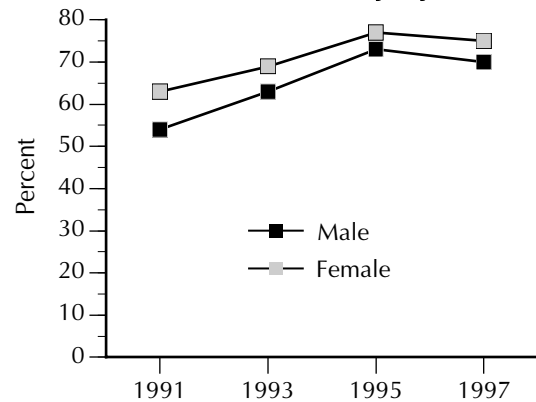
In addition to assisting states, CDC conducts national surveys every 2 years to produce data representative of students in grades 9–12 in both public and private schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The 1997 survey included more than 16,000 respondents.

To provide critical information on health risk behaviors among young people in high-risk situations and those in college, CDC has conducted additional national surveys:

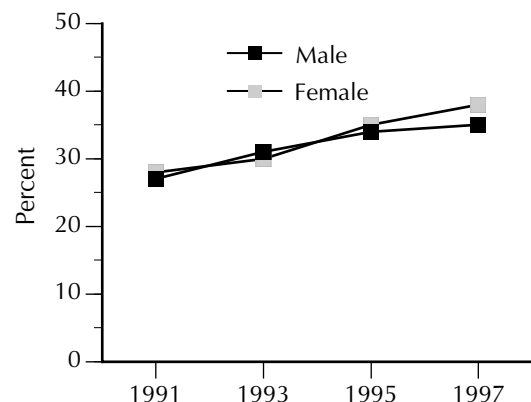
- The National Alternative High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in 1998 among a representative sample of almost 9,000 students in alternative schools.
- The National College Health Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in 1995 among a representative sample of about 5,000 undergraduate students.

## Results From National Surveys, 1991–1997

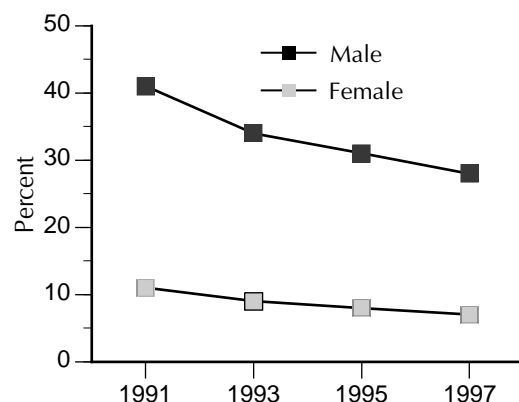
**Percentage of High School Students Who Did Not Attend Physical Education Classes Daily, by Sex**



**Percentage of High School Students Who Smoked a Cigarette in the Past Month, by Sex**

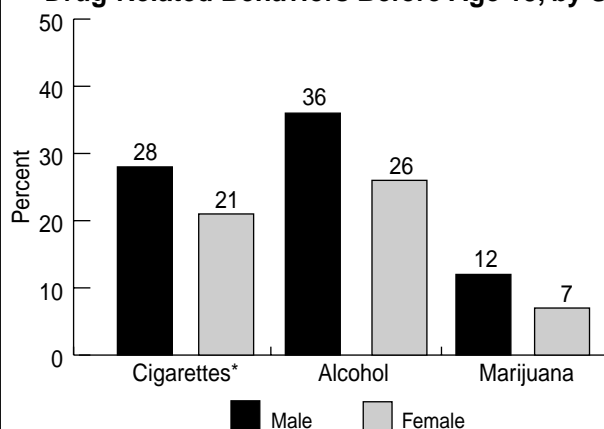


**Percentage of High School Students Who Carried a Weapon in the Past Month, by Sex**



Source: CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997.

### Percentage of High School Students Who Initiated Drug-Related Behaviors Before Age 13, by Sex



\*Smoked a whole cigarette.

Source: CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1997.

### Comments From Users of YRBSS Data

*"Folks in Montana—community people, parents—assumed that just because their kids grew up in a beautiful, large, sparsely populated state that they were immune to health risk behaviors. . . . What the YRBS has shown is that rural young people, in many cases, have problems identical to those of young people in urban areas, and in some cases the problems are worse in rural areas."*

—Spencer Sartorius, MS  
Division Administrator

Health Enhancement and Safety Bureau

*"In our school district [Dade County, Florida], YRBS data are used by school administrators in making decisions, developing and expanding our current HIV/AIDS program, assisting with student services programs and comprehensive health, developing teacher training programs and peer programs for students, and assisting with our PTA."*

—Nadine Gay, MSW  
Supervisor, HIV/AIDS Education Program

*"In Ohio's Department of Education, information from the YRBS has brought together Drug Free School consultants, nutrition consultants, some parent advocacy consultants, and individuals involved in HIV/STD and health dimensions."*

—Joyce Brannan, PhD  
Health Education Consultant

### Participants in the YRBSS, 1997

These locations conducted their own surveys.

#### States

Alabama  
Arkansas  
California  
Colorado  
Connecticut  
Delaware  
District of Columbia  
Florida  
Georgia  
Hawaii  
Idaho  
Iowa  
Kansas  
Kentucky  
Louisiana  
Maine  
Massachusetts  
Michigan  
Mississippi  
Missouri  
Montana  
Nebraska  
Nevada  
New Hampshire  
New Jersey  
New York  
North Carolina  
North Dakota  
Ohio  
Oregon  
Rhode Island  
South Carolina

South Dakota

Tennessee

Utah

Vermont

West Virginia

Wisconsin

Wyoming

#### Territories

American Samoa

Guam

Northern Mariana

Islands

Virgin Islands of the  
United States

#### Cities

Baltimore

Boston

Chicago

Dallas

Detroit

Fort Lauderdale

Houston

Jersey City

Los Angeles

Miami

Newark

New Orleans

New York

Philadelphia

San Diego

San Francisco

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**<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/YRBS>**